

A CEA Forum Roundtable

Journey into Light: Developing Better Questions Together through Qualitative Assessment

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As my colleagues have indicated, the thrill and value of qualitative assessment is that it let us loose to speak and dig into the questions that we had to keep silenced during rubric-based assessment. It allowed us to value our many questions about student writing and pedagogy. As we voiced our questions and discussed them vigorously we began to understand that the process could help each of us in refining course structure, pedagogy and assignments in the Transitional English classroom and in the college composition courses that follow.

Our original question was “What does an A, C, and F grade look in each of our classes?” and we sat around a table to share sample portfolios in each category. This question led to many others, as evidenced by our four pages of coding sub-categories in our appendix. One of the most important issues raised was about dialect. We noticed that often failing grades showed evidence of African American English, a dialect none of us knew well and most of us had not considered in our pedagogy. Like many Composition instructors, we did not have specific training in

composition; only one of us had been trained in the field (Krystia). I was trained as a journalist and educator, Jeff as a creative writer, and Katie as a literature specialist. As a result, we had not been given a proper introduction to the concept of other Englishes, and our focus was more on meeting our course objective's goals of fluent Standard English than on complicating the issue with the validity of other dialects. But with our conversations about how we grade, that was about to change, as the issue of dialect kept reemerging during our assessment sessions. The discussions of this issue had a particularly strong effect on me. As we together looked at David Johnson's "Review Essay: Defining Dialect" from what was at that time the most recent *College Composition and Communication* issue, I began to question, how do we accommodate students who speak other English dialects and help them succeed as writers? Specifically, how do we accommodate the "other English" we most encounter at the Art Institute: African American English or Black vernacular?

As a native Pittsburgher, it's pretty easy for me to deal with English dialects with which I am familiar (Here in Pittsburgh, we're fairly comfortable understanding and helping students shift into Standard American English from "Pittsburghese," like "My car needs washed," and also West Virginia and Ohio dialects). However, I found African American or Black vernacular more challenging. First, the issue is so politically charged. Our transcripts showed not only me, but all of us wrestling with the "students' right to their own language," and eagerly learning more as we came to realize how we disagreed about these rights. We read the work of Geneva Smitherman and others, and re-read our students' work with the new issues in mind. We learned

that AAE contains grammatical structures that we are only beginning to understand. As Brian C. Lewis writes in “Black English: Its History and Its Role in the Education of Our Children,” Geneva Smitherman instructs us that today’s Black vernacular is the child of West African languages and English. In the days of slavery, says Smitherman, Black English “involved the substitution of English for West African words, but within the same basic structure and idiom as that characterized West African language patterns.” As a result of our readings and conversations, I was determined to learn more. I found articles, looked up YouTube videos from the PBS special *American Tongues*, and attended Geneva Smitherman’s workshop at the 2008 CCCC.

My entire pedagogy was shaken and remade because we took the time to talk about how we grade, for if Smitherman and her supporters are right, then we as instructors should learn AAE and allow students to write and communicate in their native dialect. I began to understand that a complication of trying to teach SAE-only writing was that AAE students were in some ways more like ESL students than native SAE speakers. I realized that further complicating the experience of many urban black students in our writing classrooms is, they have been scolded by their communities for trying to “sound white.” And here I had been, telling them to use Standard American English in their speech and written works, and then grading them on how well they accomplish this, even though many of these students come from failing public schools that haven’t prepared them to use SAE.

Our readings on this issue, inspired by our deep discussions, spawned more discussions – and opportunities for learning: How do we accommodate these students and help them feel a sense of belonging, especially when a primary competency in our composition courses is to write

in Standard American English? Do we allow students to write some assignments in their home language, or do we insist from the get-go that they use SAE? How do we create a bridge for these students between their home language and the language of the academy—if we could even agree on what that means. In light of these vexing questions, we began to discuss how to change the competency requirement.

There was no consensus among us on answers to our questions. For example, Krystia allowed students to write in their native English dialect. Her rationale: to have students become aware of the structures and nuances of their own dialect, so they can better understand how their dialect differs from SAE. Jeff and Katie and I were less certain about letting students write formal papers in dialect. We felt more internal pressure to move students into using SAE immediately, which we considered the language of the academy and professions, especially given the time constraints of our quarter system. Through our discourse, we all became more sensitive to the backgrounds of students who use other English dialects and what they might need from us to succeed in college. Each of us now addresses multiple discourses and code-switching in the Transitional English classroom.

Other questions emerged from these conversations: Is there one universal academic written language that we are to prepare students to use in all of their courses? As we dug into the issue, we realized there is not. We also asked, given that there are multiple academic discourses in the university, what role then do we as composition teachers serve?

Do we serve the academy or serve the students? Our discussions inspired us to look at Chris Thais and Terry Myers Zawacki's book, *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines*:

Research on the Academic Writing Life, which challenged our assumptions that we could teach a universal academic writing genre. We rethought the function of composition courses based on the mission of the school. Some of us had been laboring under the self-imposed mission to prepare transitional English students to be able to write for the academy and for their professions. But we discovered that we cannot expect ourselves to prepare students to write in multiple academic discourses, that at some point, instructors from the disciplines need to do that. So, if we are not to provide developmental English students the gateway to the university experience, what exactly are we supposed to be providing them? We all agreed that we are hoping to help them write for themselves--to find their voices and power and to write so that readers can understand their messages, and we didn't know how to do this while trying to meet the goals of the college.

But how much control should we let them have over their own writing? Again, we were conflicted on this matter. Krystia let students identify their own writing topics and audience in a completely student-driven classroom. She believed writing classes are meant for students to discover their authority by writing in whatever mode suits their topic and purpose. The rest of us felt responsibility to teach students to write in what we perceived to be a more "academic" mode, although we also allowed for narrative writing, usually as one of the earlier projects. As Jeff liked to note, we were re-hashing the old Elbow-Bartholomae debate, over and over—but each time coming to a deeper appreciation of each other's viewpoints.

Another question we tackled: should academic modes be privileged above narrative? Allowing for the variations of writing within such modes, is our ultimate goal to teach academic writing, again, so students can (with luck) transfer the moves and practices of this mode into

their writing projects for other courses? As you see, many of our questions circle back around to each other.

Another issue that led to great frustration deals with student motivation: It's clear that students write better when they are emotionally invested in the topic. They spend more time on drafting and revision; they make better language choices; their prose comes alive with personality. But, how do we instructors motivate students who are apathetic about a writing project because it's either a topic they don't care about or in a mode they don't enjoy? While working on assessment, we frequently bemoaned students who showed capability and even talent in one piece of writing but let the whole thing drop on another writing project. We hesitantly seemed to agree that if a course has been well designed, overcoming apathy could be a matter of maturity and that these students will likely learn from their own failures what is necessary to be a successful student.

Looking at the issues and questions that emerged from our discussions, there are several ideas that warrant mention. One recurrent issue centered on the kinds of assignments that were most appropriate for Transitional English. Specifically, we discussed the varying demands and possible outcomes of assigning more traditional academic essays vs. student-centered writing that permitted choice of topic and audience. We also questioned the role of discourses in composition class and the positive and negative effects that requiring certain discourses, such as Standard American English, could have on the success of all students. Regardless of the kind of assignments present in the portfolios, we also found it interesting to look at the commonalities between successful papers in each class. Qualities like creativity and voice were attributed to A

papers, whereas lack of evidence of process was a universal issue in papers that were non-passing. The lack of process was often attributed to an apathetic attitude which challenged us as instructors to evaluate our role and responsibility to motivate as well as instruct. Something also emerged in our discussion of non-passing papers, which was the under-preparedness of some of the students who enter into transitional classes. While many are quite capable of moving on to college English in eleven weeks, others needed more than one quarter to develop and refine their writing. Sometimes affecting their success was also the presence of a learning disability, which we all agreed warranted the need to establish a stronger support system both in the sense of hiring specialists and in-depth training for the faculty inside and outside of the English department. Finally, each of these issues segued into a multitude of other discussions, questions, and disagreements that took us to a deeper and more complex view of our pedagogy and practice.

So what did this analysis mean for our program? Many of our results, and the attendant analyses, were tied to complex issues that did not lend themselves to easy and immediate action. In most cases, further assessment was needed. However, there were some things that our group was able to take immediate action upon. It was clear to us that regarding the question of underprepared students, AiP was not adequately staffed to handle ESL students or students with disabilities. While it was our hope that these issues will eventually be addressed on an institutional level, it would be possible for individual instructors to receive some basic training in each of these areas for practical use in the classroom. Therefore, we requested and planned for such training during our faculty development time at a future in-service. This training was

successfully carried out during January 2009. A second action item was a continuation of our current practice of keeping ENG 095 sections in the hands of full-time faculty who have been privy to the work of this assessment and know our students and the particular issues that they bring to the ENG 095 classroom. Finally, the group decided to not only continue with our current practice of using a meta-compositional reflection piece as the focus of our assessment, but also to give this assignment a higher priority within our syllabi so that it acts as a demonstration of what the student has learned in the course. It was the reflective piece in the portfolios that brought to our attention students' excitement about certain assignments and apathy about others, and made us question what writing projects we assign. Furthermore, this reflection was a place where students sometimes expressed their discomfort with the English written language, which helped us understand that they did not comprehend that they were perhaps struggling more with the dialect than with writing. The reflections also provided a common point of comparison between our courses, helping to focus the questions that emerged from our conversations. We decided to ask all instructors to give the assignment even more emphasis.

Our personal changes from the assessment also affected our program. Here are some ways that we have used the experience/questions to improve our teaching:

- Jeff has made the major project for his 095 class student-centered because of the nature of our students and the kinds of writing their careers will demand of them. He allows for all narrative writing in 095, with a brief introduction to MLA and research methods.

- In her composition classes, Krystia began to encourage more integration and analysis of quotations in order to engender more of the intertextuality we all liked in each others' students' work.
- Katie now allows students to identify their own topics. After a short paper on education spurred by readings by Malcolm X and others, she finds that about 50 percent of her students elect to write narratives, while others write research papers. All students must incorporate outside sources.
- I now incorporate overt discussion and study of American dialects into my course, in order to meet students where they are and help them feel welcome and capable of writing well.

We continue to question our pedagogy and assessment practices based on our investigation and evaluation of our English 095 class.

Through qualitative assessment, our English faculty's questions about evaluating student writing have evolved, becoming more complicated, developed, and sophisticated. Whereas rubric-based assessment forced us to ask specified, limited questions (e.g., Is the thesis clear and the paper organized logically using the rules of Standard American English?), now we are exploring more meaningful questions of how we value student work: Should academic, expository writing be privileged? To what extent do effective student writing practices in our classes transfer to other disciplines? What is "voice," how do we teach it, and can it possibly be graded against a rubric? Should dialects of American English be valued (African American or Hispanic American vernacular, etc.), or must all students be impelled to write effectively in

Standard American English? In what ways are our artistic students different from those in public and private universities, and should our expectations of them reflect those differences? The questions derived from our qualitative assessment are helping us design better syllabi and better assignments, and to become better teachers.

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